A Market by the Way:
The Economics of Nowhere

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William Morris described himself as a communist and declared his objective to be the establishment of a communist society. In calling himself a communist Morris was consciously identifying himself with a tradition which, in its written form, may be traced in modern times from Thomas More’s Utopia to the manifesto drawn up by Marx and Engels for the Communist League of Germany in 1848. Morris was also aware that men and women had once lived in social conditions resembling those he wanted to see established and that vestiges of these had survived into medieval and modern times. Unfortunately, since his day the word ‘communism’ has become distorted to refer to the bureaucratic, class-divided societies that exist in countries such as Russia and China. This was not at all what Morris meant by communism. At most he might have regarded the period immediately following the Russian revolution as an attempt to establish the ‘State Socialism’ he saw as a very probable, but far from desirable, stage on the way to communism. Subsequent developments in Russia, however, would have confirmed his worst fears about the dangers of society becoming bogged down in this stage and ending up as what would now be called ‘state capitalism’ rather than evolving rapidly towards the ‘pure Communism’ described in News from Nowhere and which he declared to be ‘the only reasonable condition of Society’.

The society Morris wanted to see established was not an ideal social system which he had invented out of his own imagination. In becoming a communist Morris joined an historical tradition which already had a clear idea about the basic features of the society it advocated:
common ownership in place of private property, and, instead of buying and selling, production and distribution according to need. Morris was in fact to become one of communism’s most eloquent advocates.

Morris, however, wanted to say more about communism than these bare essentials of it being a society of common ownership and distribution according to need. He wanted to bring it alive for people, as a means of getting them to want to establish it, by showing how it could function and what it could be like. His intention was not to draw up a blueprint of what communism had to be like, but merely to illustrate what it might be like. Naturally, and quite legitimately, in News from Nowhere, which describes a communist society that has been in existence for a number of generations, he also incorporated into this picture features which he personally wanted it to have.

Morris’s personal preferences ranged from such matters as styles of dress and architecture to the non-use of machinery in agriculture and a revival of handicraft for the production of articles of everyday use. What I want to discuss in this chapter, however, is how he handled the question, which all communist writers have to face, of how the production and distribution of wealth could be organized in a society without money or coercive government.

Production for Use and the End of Buying and Selling

‘The Communist’, stated Morris in a lecture on Communism he delivered in 1893, ‘asserts in the first place that the resources of nature, mainly the land and those other things which can only be used for the reproduction of wealth and which are the effect of social work, should not be owned in severalty, but by the whole community for the benefit of the whole. . . . The resources of nature therefore, and the wealth used for the production of further wealth, the plant and stock in short, should be communized.’

Morris argued that such a community of equals, having full and free access to the means of production, would naturally use them to produce the useful things it needed to satisfy the individual and collective needs of its members. In communism, production oriented towards selling on a market with a view to profits for a privileged
owning class would automatically cease, and be replaced by production directly for use. 'The whole system founded on the World Market and its supply' as he puts it in News from Nowhere, would disappear and be replaced by one founded instead on 'the satisfaction of the common needs of mankind and the preparation for them'.

Morris saw this satisfaction of 'the common needs', or ordinary needs, of all its members, as the only rational aim of human society. He became a communist when he realized that this would only be possible on the basis of what he described as 'the workers properly organized for production' having free access to means of production as well as its fruits which they would have co-operated to make available.

The principle 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs' would apply: 'No other ideal on this matter of livelihood in a post-monopolist community appears to me worth considering than the satisfaction of each man's needs in return for the exercise of his faculties for the benefit of each and all: to me this seems the only rational society. And this means practical equality. For when you have satisfied the man's needs what else can you do for him?'

In communism everybody would be able freely to satisfy their needs; they would not have to pay for the useful things they needed but could simply go to the stores and take them according to their own assessment of their needs. This is what happens in the communist society described in News from Nowhere where the Guest from the 19th century once or twice gets himself into incomprehensible situations by wanting to pay for things. Although it is not until halfway through the narrative (the end of Chapter XIV) that Morris uses the term 'communism' to describe the society existing in Nowhere, he introduces very early on (Chapter XI) the fact that money is no longer used, as in the following brilliant passage. Dick Hammond has just rowed Guest across the Thames:

He jumped out and I followed him; and of course I was not surprised to see him wait, as if for the inevitable after-piece that follows the doing of a service to a fellow-citizen. So I put my hand in my waistcoat-pocket, and said 'How much?' though still with the uncomfortable feeling that perhaps I was offering money to a gentleman. He looked puzzled, and said, 'How much? I don't
quite understand what you are asking about. Do you mean the tide? If so, it is close on the turn now.' I blushed, and said, stammering, 'Please don't take it amiss if I ask you; I mean no offence: but what ought I to pay you? You see I am a stranger, and don't know your customs—or your coins.' And therewith I took a handful of money out of my pocket, as one does in a foreign country. And by the way, I saw that the silver had oxydised, and was like a blacklead stove in colour.

He still seemed puzzled, but not at all offended; and he looked at the coins with some curiosity. I thought, Well after all, he is a waterman, and is considering what he may venture to take. He seems such a nice fellow that I'm sure I don't grudge him a little over-payment. I wonder, by the way, whether I couldn't hire him as a guide for a day or two, since he is so intelligent. Therewith my new friend said thoughtfully: 'I think I know what you mean. You think that I have done you a service; so you feel yourself bound to give me something which I am not to give to a neighbour, unless he has done something special for me. I have heard of this kind of thing; but pardon me for saying, that it seems to us a troublesome and roundabout custom; and we don't know how to manage it. And you see this ferrying and giving people casts about the water is my business, which I would do for anybody; so to take gifts in connection with it would look very queer. Besides, if one person gave me something, then another might, and another, and so on; and I hope you won't think me rude if I say that I shouldn't know where to stow away so many mementoes of friendship.' And he laughed loud and merrily, as if the idea of being paid for his work was a very funny joke. I confess I began to be afraid that the man was mad, though he looked sane enough; and I was rather glad to think that I was a good swimmer, since we were so close to a deep swift stream. However, he went on by no means like a madman: 'As to your coins, they are curious, but not very old; they seem to be all of the reign of Victoria; you might give them to some scantily-furnished museum. Ours has enough of such coins, besides a fair number of earlier ones, many of which are beautiful, whereas these nineteenth century ones are so beastly ugly, ain't they?'
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Guest again gets into the same difficulty when, later on, in 'another exhibition of extinct commercial morality', he asks the young girl serving in the store in Piccadilly how he will be able to pay for the tobacco pouch she offers him.

Morris had begun the chapter in which this incident occurs (Chapter VI 'A Little Shopping') as follows:

As he spoke, we came suddenly out of the woodland into a short street of handsomely built houses, which my companion named to me at once as Piccadilly: the lower part of these I should have called shops, if it had not been that, as far as I could see, the people were ignorant of the arts of buying and selling. Wares were displayed in their finely designed fronts, as if to tempt people in, and people stood and looked at them, or went in and came out with parcels under their arms, just like the real thing.

It is through these literary devices that Morris brings out the idea that communism would be a society without buying and selling and without money, in which people would have free access to goods and services according to their own self-defined needs.

Common Ownership Not Government Ownership

Within the framework of the common ownership and distribution according to needs, which have to be the basic features of any communist society, a great many decision-making arrangements are conceivable and were in fact conceived by different writers in the communist tradition. Thomas More's communism had many hierarchical features, while Etienne Caber, in his Voyage to Icaria, describes a communist society in which all production and distribution is controlled by a single democratically-controlled centre. Others retained the idea of control by a single centre but dropped the idea of democratic control, envisaging decisions being made by some group of experts. Edward Bellamy, whose Looking Backward provoked Morris into writing News from Nowhere, had such central control being exercised by the General Council of the 'industrial army' into which he saw the workforce being organized in order to carry out production. Morris placed himself at the other end of this spectrum.
While not denying the need for a certain degree of central coordination, he outlined the case for a communist society of equals in which decision-making power would flow from bottom upwards rather than from the top down.

Morris was well aware that the 'equality of condition' which would exist in communism made the whole concept of property redundant. In his lecture 'How We Live and How We Might Live' he speaks of 'the people—that is, all society—duly organized, having in its own hands the means of production, to be owned by no individual, but used by all as occasion called for its use.' To say that someone 'owns' something is to say that they control access to it to the exclusion of everyone else. But if everybody, either as an individual or as a member of a 'duly organized' group, has free access to the means of production, then no one is excluded; every member of society stands in the same position with regard to using the means of production. Thus it is just as accurate to say that communism is based on the non-ownership as on the common ownership of the means of production. In communism the means of production belong to no one, to no individual nor to any group or institution within society; they are simply there to be used. The concept of property is replaced by that of use; property rights in the means of production give way to commonly agreed social arrangements for allowing the members of society free access to means of production to use as and when needed.

Although Morris envisaged what he called 'state socialism' (but which Kropotkin more accurately called 'state capitalism') as a likely transitional stage on the way to communism, he was adamant that communism itself could not be based on state or government ownership. This was because he saw the state as essentially an instrument of coercion, a means of governing people, of ruling over them, which could not exist in the classless society of equals he envisaged communism as necessarily being. For him the State was the machinery of coercion (government, courts, armed forces, police, prisons) needed to enforce the monopoly exercised by the owning class over access to the means of production. It followed that the abolition of this monopoly would mean the end also of the machinery needed to enforce it and hence the disappearance of government and the State. This is very well brought out by Morris in Chapter xi of News from
Nowhere, 'Concerning Government', where Old Hammond explains to Guest that 'we have no longer anything which you . . . would call a government'. Coercive government is replaced in communism by non-coercive 'arrangements' for settling social affairs.

In short, for Morris, communism could not be based on government ownership because there would be no government in communism. For him communism did not mean that the means of production are to be owned by an institution apart from the members of society, but rather that these means are freely available when people need to use them. In contrast to government ownership, common ownership is not a form of property, but the arrangements made to allow people full and free access to the means of production.

Morris held that in communism the coercive functions of a central government would simply disappear, while most of its purely administrative activities would be devolved to local communities and groups of producers. Morris wrote with Bax in Socialism Its Growth and Outcome (also originally published as a series of articles in The Commonweal) that after the revolution there 'should take place a gradual and increasing delegation of the present powers of central government to municipal and local bodies, until the political nation should be sapped, and give place to a federation of local and industrial organisations' which would eventually develop into 'a complete automatic system'.

In his lecture 'How Shall We Live Then?' Morris suggested, 'in order to give all men a share in the responsibility of the administration of things which I hope will take the place of the government of persons', that the basic 'unit of management' in communism should be the local community—a commune, or a ward, or a parish', as he put it in News from Nowhere. Such a relatively small unit was desirable, he argued, 'so that the greatest possible number of persons might be interested in public affairs'. As Old Hammond explains in Chapter xiv of News from Nowhere ('How Matters Are Managed'), the decision-making body in these communities would be the general meeting ('mote') of all the members of the community; normally decisions would be taken by consensus and only as a last resort by majority vote and then only provided that all those taking part in the vote agreed to accept its result.
As no such local community could be, or would need or want to be, entirely self-sufficient, it would have to have links with others for certain purposes. Morris suggested that this be done on a federal basis, so that centralized States would come to be replaced, on a world as well as a national level, by a ‘Federation of Independent Communities’, ‘a system of free communities living in harmonious federation with each other, managing their own affairs by the free consent of their members’. As he and Bax wrote: ‘The highest unit would be the great council of the socialized world, and between these would be federations of localities arranged for convenience of administration. The great federal organizing power, whatever form it took, would have the function of the administration of production in its wider sense. It would have to see to, for instance, the collection and distribution of all information as to the wants of populations and the possibilities of supplying them, leaving all details to the subordinate bodies, local and industrial.’

The federal bodies would be composed of delegates from local communities and, once again, having no coercive power to impose their decisions, would normally have to reach decisions by consensus. The role of the centre would essentially be statistical, gathering information about what goods were needed and then passing this on to the appropriate bodies for them to arrange for this to be produced.

Morris and Bax went on to suggest that, just as the basic unit of administration would be the local community, so the basic industrial unit would be a local ‘guild’: ‘Topographically, we conceive of the township as the lowest unit, industrially, of the trade or occupation organized somewhat on the lines of a craft-guild. In many instances the local branch of the guild would be within the limits of the township.’ So, those working in the same trade or industry would organize themselves into a body to control production in that particular branch. These industrial bodies too would federate on a national and a world basis. In one of his early lectures, ‘Justice and Socialism’ (1885), Morris envisaged a sort of industrial parliament to discuss and arrange such matters:

As to what goods are required by the community that the community will settle for itself by means of any set of rational representatives whom it may select for this purpose. Nothing can possibly
be easier with any decent organization than to find out for instance whether more boots and shoes are wanted than are being made and to act accordingly. It is not moreover difficult to imagine a system by which representatives of all the trades should meet together to settle questions of trade. It must be recollected of course that there being no classes, such representatives are really so being simple members of the body they represent, and very unlike our ‘members of parliament’.  

So Morris was suggesting, as a way of organizing decision-making and wealth production in a communist world, an administrative and industrial structure based, on the one hand, on local communities federated into regions which would send delegates to a World Council and, on the other, on the organization of productive units into local, regional and no doubt world delegate bodies according to the nature of the product concerned.

Recurring Alternative to the Capitalist World-Market
This is a radical alternative to what existed in Morris’s day, and which still exists in an even more developed form in our day, and which Morris, speaking through Old Hammond described as follows:

It is clear from all that we hear and read, that in the last age of civilization men got into a vicious circle in the matter of production of wares. They had reached a wonderful facility of production, and in order to make the most of that facility they had gradually created (or allowed to grow, rather) a most elaborate system of buying and selling, which has been called the World-Market; and that World-Market, once set a-going, forced them to go on making more and more of these wares, whether they needed them or not. So that while (of course) they could not free themselves from the toil of making real necessaries, they created in a never-ending series sham or artificial necessaries, which became, under the iron rule of the aforesaid World-Market, of equal importance to them with the real necessaries which supported life. By all this they burdened themselves with a prodigious mass of work merely for the sake of keeping their wretched system going. . . . Since
they had forced themselves to stagger along under this horrible burden of unnecessary production, it became impossible for them to look upon labour and its results from any other point of view than one—to wit, the ceaseless endeavour to expend the least possible amount of labour on any article made, and yet at the same time to make as many articles as possible. To this ‘cheapening of production’, as it was called, everything was sacrificed: the happiness of the workman at his work, nay, his most elementary comfort and bare health, his food, his clothes, his dwelling, his leisure, his amusement, his education—his life, in short—did not weigh a grain of sand in the balance against this dire necessity of ‘cheap production’ of things, a great part of which were not worth producing at all. . . . The whole community, in fact, was cast into the jaws of this ravening monster, ‘the cheap production’ forced upon it by the World-Market.22

Communism would end this tyranny of the world market and allow humans to escape from the vicious circle it engendered and to re-orientate production towards the satisfaction of their ordinary needs:

The wares which we make are made because they are needed: men make for their neighbours’ use as if they were making for themselves, not for a vague market of which they know nothing, and over which they have no control: as there is no buying and selling, it would be mere insanity to make goods on the chance of their being wanted; for there is no longer any one who can be compelled to buy them. So that whatever is made is good, and thoroughly fit for its purpose. Nothing can be made except for genuine use; therefore no inferior goods are made. Moreover, as aforesaid, we have now found out what we want, so we make no more than we want; and as we are not driven to make a vast quantity of useless things, we have time and resources enough to consider our pleasure in making them.23

As Morris felt that most of these common, or ordinary needs of people—for food, clothes, housing and household goods—could and should be met locally, what he was proposing was the replacement of the world market and centralized States by an interlocking network
of human-scale communities that would be largely self-reliant as far as the provision of their members' more basic needs was concerned. In other words, in Morris's vision of world communism, there would be production for local use, supplemented as necessary by transfers of essential materials and products not available everywhere between regions arranged by co-ordinating centres at regional and world levels.

Such a world society was a serious proposition even in Morris's day. His contemporary, Peter Kropotkin, argued the case for it in scientific rather than literary terms in a series of articles that appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1888-90 and later published as a book under the title *Fields, Factories and Workshops.* It had also been proposed previously by others in the communist tradition such as Gerrard Winstanley in the middle of the 17th century and Robert Owen earlier on in the 19th. A similar case has been made in our days by Murray Bookchin with his suggestion that humans should organize themselves for producing and living into 'eco-regions' whose size would be determined by the ecology of the area they inhabit.

The structure proposed by Morris was not just a personal whim but a proposal that has come up time and again as an alternative to the capitalist world-market system. As such it is a proposal that deserves serious consideration as to whether it could work from an economic point of view: could the production and distribution of wealth be organized to satisfy human needs in a world without money and without centralized, coercive states? Before doing this, however, there is one misunderstanding concerning Morris that has to be cleared up and that concerns his attitude towards modern technology.

Because Morris himself had a personal dislike of steam-driven machinery, and makes it disappear in his vision of communism, he has been accused of advocating a return to a 'pastoral simplicity' quite inapplicable to the economic complexities of a modern industrial economy. This is to miss the point completely since Morris was concerned not so much with the technology of production in communism as with its purpose, but even on the level of technology critics like Thompson are wrong. Morris lived in an age whose technology
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was based on coal and iron. The electrical motor and the internal combustion engine had only just been invented and had not yet been applied to production; transport was by steam locomotive or horse-drawn carriage; houses and streets were lit by gas; many—in fact, most—workers still worked in small workshops rather than large factories. Morris did have a personal dislike of steam-powered machinery and naturally, in his personal account of what he would like to see develop in a communist society that had been in existence for a few generations, has it disappear. This means that there are no railways in Nowhere so that water again has become a major means of long-distance transport. But to have abolished the steam engine in 1890 would not have been to take technology back to Ancient times (to ‘Arcadia’) nor to Medieval times, but merely back a hundred years, to the technology existing in the middle of the 18th century—the same technology on which Adam Smith, the mentor of Thompson and other critics of communism, based his theory of the need for a profit-driven market economy.

Morris did not write so much of abolishing steam engines as of their becoming largely unnecessary (some coal is still mined in Nowhere), partly because people would prefer to make things of everyday use by hand but also partly because he foresaw that there would be a ‘great change in the use of mechanical force’.27 He did not go into much detail here, but it is clear a couple of references—to people being able to have power ‘at the places where they live, or hard by’28 and to the mysteriously-powered ‘force barges’29—that he had in mind some form of electrical power, which is hardly a source of energy that would exist in a ‘pastoral’ or ‘Arcadian’ society.

Morris could not have foreseen—but then he was not writing a science fiction book, nor did he want to imitate the technological speculations of a Bellamy—that the application of electricity to industry under capitalism would give the coal-burning steam engine another application in that electricity came to be generated by steam-driven turbines. Nor could he have foreseen that even today no efficient system of electrical storage, such as would permit the general use of force-barges and electric cars or power at home without pylons and cables, has been invented. However, as it happens, electricity can be generated by means such as wind and water power and solar
heaters and batteries which would have been compatible with the sort of decentralized society Morris had in mind and in fact provide a modern technological basis for it.

_Is Communism Economically Feasible?_

'It’s a nice idea, but it wouldn’t work' is the popular objection to pure communism and is a thought that will have occurred to many a reader of _News from Nowhere_. A whole branch of conventional economics exists to provide a theoretical justification for this popular view. The basic objection is that it is impossible to organize the production and distribution of wealth, at least not without enormous waste and inefficiency, without having recourse to money and monetary calculation. Since money, as a medium of exchange, implies the existence of exchange and since exchange implies the existence of products belonging to separate owners (exchange is not a physical transfer of products but a change of ownership rights over them), to say that you cannot abolish money is to say that you cannot abolish private ownership and so can never establish communism.

One economist in this field, Alec Nove, has argued that the abolition of pricing, buying and selling, and monetary calculation, would only be possible given two conditions—‘absolute abundance and a species of static equilibrium’—both of which he regards as being unrealistic, indeed unrealizable. Given these assumptions, he writes:

All inputs are then as abundantly and as freely available as water is in Scotland. Requirements, needs, inputs, techniques, are all known and hardly ever change. Just as the citizen will go to the store to collect whatever goods he or she wants, so the management would fetch the required steel sheet, lathes, sulphuric acid, cloth, pork, cabbages; that would dispose of the problem of the planning of inputs. The workers will then produce the output which ‘society’ or its customers require. No money would pass, there would be no exchange, no purchase-and-sale. So—no commodity production. Also no complex bureaucratic central planning mechanism. _Et voilà!_
Actually, despite its ironic tone, this provides a clue as to how a communist society could organize the production and distribution of wealth without either the market mechanism or bureaucratic central planning: on the basis of the productive units having free access to the resources they require to produce the goods and services to meet people's needs. Communist society would have to set up an integrated structure of circuits of production and distribution at local, regional and world levels which would allow the flow of wealth to the final consumer to take place on this basis of each unit in the structure having free access to what it needed to fulfil its role. Once this had been established the system would be more or less self-regulating in the way that the market economy is supposed to be, only with productive units responding not to monetary demand but to real demand as indicated by what people actually took from the stores under conditions of free access. The role of the centre would be, as envisaged by Morris and Bax, essentially statistical. Indeed, Nove denies that this would be planning as 'the centre has no function'.

Morris envisaged what people indicated they needed being recorded and acted upon by people he refers to as 'housekeepers'. As Hammond explains to Guest at the end of Chapter xii 'Concerning the Arrangement of Life':

Although there are so many, indeed by far the greater number amongst us, who would be unhappy if they were not engaged in actually making things, and things which turn out beautiful under their hands,—there are many, like the housekeepers I was speaking of, whose delight is in administration and organization, to use long-tailed words; I mean people who like keeping things together, avoiding waste, seeing that nothing sticks fast uselessly. Such people are thoroughly happy in their business, all the more as they are dealing with actual facts, and not merely passing counters round to see what share they shall have in the privileged taxation of useful people, which was the business of the commercial folk in past days.

As this passage makes clear, for Morris calculations in communist society would be done directly in physical quantities, so that not only would money not function as a means of exchange but it would not
function as a unit of account either. Calculation in kind would replace monetary calculation just as free access according to need would replace buying and selling. ‘Housekeeper’, a translation into words of Anglo-Saxon origin of the Greek-derived word ‘economist’, was probably deliberately chosen by Morris (in accordance with the structure of the English language where words of Anglo-Saxon origin tend to refer to the concrete while those of Latin and Greek origin tend to refer to the abstract) to bring out the fact that such people would be concerned with concrete physical quantities rather than abstract monetary calculations. They would be stock controllers, not accountants.

Is abundance an unrealistic assumption, as Nove claims? That depends on how you define the word. The easiest definition of abundance is to say that it is the opposite of scarcity. Scarcity, however, is a relative concept in that something can only be said to be scarce in relation to the need for it. Conventional economics, which defines itself as the study of the best way to allocate scarce resources, has invented a fictional type of human being, *Homo economicus*, whose wants are limitless: an individual who always wants more and more of everything and so someone whose needs could only be satisfied if resources too were limitless. It is in relation to the needs of such fictional individuals that conventional economics defines both scarcity and abundance. Abundance, for it, is a situation where the resources for producing goods and services are available in limitless supply. Since this condition of what Nove calls ‘absolute’ abundance (other economists refer to it as being ‘total’ or ‘sheer’ abundance) clearly does not exist, and could only exist in some Garden of Eden where resources literally grew on trees for taking when needed, conventional economists like Nove are teaching that humanity is lumbered with scarcity as an eternal fact of economic life, indeed of the human condition, requiring recourse to pricing, buying and selling, and monetary calculation—and therefore private ownership—which too become eternal and inevitable features of economic life.

Such a definition of abundance bears no relation to the real world of real men and women engaged in transforming nature to satisfy their various socially-determined needs. For needs do not exist as the
wants of some abstract individual outside society, but are always the needs of concrete individuals in a concrete social context. Quite simply, needs are not, and never have been, infinite; they are in fact relatively modest: healthy food, comfortable clothes, decent housing and all the other requirements to lead a life free from material insecurity (together with non-material needs such as being part of a genuine community and getting enjoyment from working, which a commercial society like capitalism cannot even understand, let alone take account of).

The fact that human needs are not infinite undermines the whole theoretical basis on which conventional economics is constructed. For if needs have a limit, then the Garden of Eden definition of abundance falls and the question that has to be asked is whether or not resources are sufficient to meet, not the needs of fictional *Homo economicus*, but what Morris called 'the common needs of mankind'. Are there, or are there not, sufficient resources in the world, either actually or potentially, to satisfy the needs of every man, women and child on the planet Earth? This is not the place to set out the detailed scientific research and factual surveys which show the answer to be yes. Suffice it to say that abundance in the sense of being able to produce more than enough to satisfy Morris's common needs could exist. So Morris's assumption of there being enough resources available in a communist society for people to be able to take according to their needs is not at all unrealistic.

Because this abundance would not be 'absolute', choices, including mutually exclusive ones, would still have to be made. This would be on the basis of a direct comparison of the real concrete advantages and disadvantages of the competing projects. Thus, at Wallingford, among other things, Henry Morsom shows Guest, Ellen, Dick and Clara

an account of a certain village council who were working hard at all this business; and the record of their intense earnestness in getting to the bottom of some matter which in time past would have seemed quite trivial as, for example, the due proportions of alkali and oil for soap-making for the village wash, or the exact heat of the water into which a leg of mutton should be plunged for boiling—all this joined to the utter absence of anything like
party feeling, which even in a village assembly would certainly have made its appearance in an earlier epoch, and was very amusing, and at the same time instructive.\(^3\)

The examples are mundane but deliberately so, as Morris wanted to bring out the point that the various assemblies and councils that would exist in communist society would have to discuss everyday, practical problems concerning the organization of production for need (Morris’s examples concern, in accordance with his personal preference of what should happen in communism, agricultural and artisanal production, but we can imagine the same sort of discussions concerning industrial production; it is the principle not the content that is important here). Decisions and choices concerning production in a communist society would be made on the basis of a direct comparison between known wants in relation to available physical resources and not on that of trying to reduce both to some abstract unit of economic value. Comparisons and calculation in real, physical terms would, here also, replace the monetary calculation of ‘the commercial system’.

Conventional economics finds the idea of a steady-state economy\(^3\) just as absurd as abundance, and for the same reason: it conflicts with its basic assumption of infinite wants. Obviously, if wants are infinite, then a situation where they are going to be satisfied, and where production can platform off is never going to be reached. The drive to make better and better use of ‘scarce resources’ by accumulating more, and ever more productive, instruments of production—economic growth—will continue indefinitely. Morris realized, and has Old Hammond clearly say so in *News from Nowhere*, that this drive towards ‘the cheapening of production’, with all its harmful effects on working and living conditions and on the environment, was the consequence not of human nature (*Homo economicus* is a myth) but of the productive system being oriented towards selling on the world market, and so would cease once production had come to be reoriented towards the direct satisfaction of local needs.

If needs are recognized as being finite, it is ‘growth for growth’s sake’, and not a steady-state economy, that appears as the absurdity. A steady-state economy, in which production would be geared simply to meeting current needs and to replacing and repairing the existing
stock of means of production (both raw materials and instruments of production), then emerges as a much more normal situation than an economy geared blindly to accumulating more and more means of production. After all, the only rational reason for accumulating means of production is eventually to be in a position fully to satisfy people’s needs. Once the stock of means of production at the disposal of a society which had set itself this goal, as a communist society would, has been built up to this level, then accumulation, or the further expansion of the stock of means of production, can stop and production levels be stabilized.

It is true that today human needs are far from being met on a world scale and that a growth in the production of food, housing and other basic amenities would still be needed for some years even if production ceased to be governed by the economic laws of the capitalist world market. But since Morris is writing about a communist society that has been established for a number of generations it was again quite reasonable of him to assume that by that time production would have reached a level at which accumulation could stop and a steady-state economy come into being.

In any event, the achievement of such an economy is an ecological imperative. Humans are a part of nature, but a part that has yet to find a stable niche in the ecology of the biosphere. Such a niche has to be found as, whatever conventional economists may teach about economic growth having to continue for ever, it simply cannot. Sooner or later, humanity must establish a stable, sustainable relationship with the rest of nature, one where its needs on a world scale, and what it takes from the rest of nature to satisfy them, would be in balance with the capacity of the biosphere to renew itself after supplying them. Indeed, it is because such a balance could only be achieved within the framework of a communist society that Morris’s communism remains not just a practical solution to the problem of how rationally to satisfy ‘the common needs of mankind’ but an urgent necessity if the human species is to survive in harmony with the rest of nature.
of 'extension' should be made manifest. See also George Devey's work at Penshurst Place as an example of mid-Victorian eclectic and accretive compositional tactics.


28 See Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, op. cit. 'Architecture as ideology of the plan is swept away by the reality of the plan when, the level of utopia having been superseded, the plan becomes an operative mechanism.'


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8 - A MARKET BY THE WAY

1 Thomas More *Utopia* (1551) English translation by Ralph Robinson (London).


3 N.F.N., p. 288.


5 N.F.N., p. 368.


7 N.F.N., pp. 188-9.

8 Ibid., p. 217.
9 Ibid., p. 213.
11 E. Bellamy Looking Backward (1889) republished by Harmondsworth (1986).
12 ‘How we live, and how we might live’ in A.L. Morton op. cit.
15 See note 6.
16 N.F.N., p. 270.
17 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 219.
23 Ibid., p. 280.
27 N.F.N., p. 250.
28 Ibid., p. 226.
29 Ibid., p. 350.
30 A. Nove Feasible Socialism (George Allen & Unwin, 1983).
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 366.
34 H. Daly, ed. Towards a Steady State Economy (Freeman, 1973).